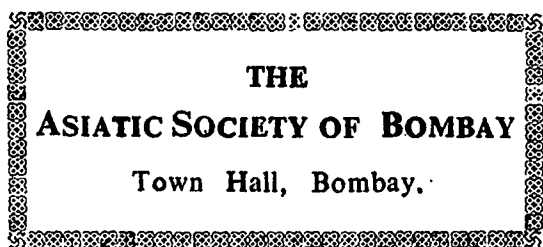


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NAPOLEON III.

AND

THE RHINE.

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BY

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NAPOLÉON THE THIRD & THE RHINE.

THE question of the French frontier of the Rhine, is like a bottle of the sparkling produce of that debateable land: once broached it must be discussed. Those who think the question was heedlessly opened and speedily closed, are doubly mistaken. It was opened by one who is accustomed to deliberation, and it is not closed. "It was opened in order to satisfy public opinion in France." What is public opinion in France? The source of the constitution, the main-spring of national action, the very life and soul of the Empire. And this great power has now spoken of the rectification of the Rhenish frontier! Why should the public opinion of France have uttered irrevocable words? Why should the silence of half a century be broken? Because the Europe of to-day is not the Europe of 1815; and especially because the France of to-day is not the fettered and degraded France of fifty years ago.

Waterloo has been ranked amongst the decisive battles of the world. Yet where are its decisions now? Within a period commensurate with some Chancery suits, the final court of appeal has reversed the arbitrament of the sword. Time has vindicated the policy of Napoleon, and the com-

binations of his living intellect have been equalled by the triumphs he has achieved from his tomb. His *régime* is continued, and not merely in name. The present Emperor, inspired by the genius of his predecessor, is the chief ruler of Europe. Again a Napoleon gives away kingdoms, and creates empires. He bestows the iron crown of Lombardy on the House of Savoy, and gives a throne in the New World to the House of Hapsburg. Without moving a soldier of his own he restores Venice to herself. In a word, he has made France eminent in diplomacy and in war.

His domestic policy has been equally successful. He found France on the verge of bankruptcy ;—her railways at a discount, her capital hoarded, her political instability involving a chronic commercial crisis. Her bullion had become a refugee. It was gravely foretold that her credit would become Spanish, and that her currency would become Austrian. After fifteen years of rapid, but smooth and equal progress, what do we behold? The French Empire transformed into the first commercial country in the world.

Compare her now with the prolific mother of modern commerce. In England money is dear, in France it is cheap. A prolonged panic in the one country, a plethora of wealth in the other. We have seen the largest discount houses, the most famous contractors, the most trusted banks trembling and toppling in England, whilst her neighbour has not felt a single financial failure. Many of the iron locomotives that move the commerce of Great Britain are manufactured for her by her rival. Even the

sheets of the London newspapers are imported from the other side of the Channel ; and the palladium of British liberty has its material source in France !

But, strangest and saddest contrast of all. The Emperor congratulates his Chambers on the fact that, in 1866, France has neither a single political offender in her prisons, nor a single political refugee beyond her frontiers. Our gracious sovereign deplores the existence of a wide-spread, treasonable conspiracy, necessitating the suspension of the constitution in one part of the United Kingdom. Political prisoners are undergoing penal servitude in the capital of England. More than a thousand political offenders have been arrested, and the powers of the Mutiny Act are brought into operation to punish soldiers for political crimes. Beyond the Atlantic frontier of the United Kingdom, hundreds of thousands of individuals who were born in allegiance to Queen Victoria, are now avowed and active enemies of her crown.

Having given France power abroad, and political content at home, and having more than restored her commerce, her sovereign, as the exponent of her opinion, speaks of restoring the ancient frontiers. This proposal, it is said, involves "a violation of the great title-deed of modern Europe, the Treaty of Vienna."

What is the Treaty of Vienna? It somewhat resembles a famous statute of the reign of Charles the Second, which under the operation of the recent commission for revising the Acts of Parliament has been denuded, one by one, of its various clauses, until nothing of it is left but the date and the preamble. The enacting clauses of the Treaty have been torn

from it, and little remains but an international skeleton, sometimes used to terrify weak minds, but, in truth, without vitality or power. This has not been the work of enemies. The diplomatic monster of 1815 has been hacked to pieces by the Frankensteins who created it. Russia, Austria, Prussia, England—in short, all who made and signed the Treaty—have sometimes singly, sometimes in conspiracy, attacked and destroyed it. Yet, strange hallucination, there are diplomats who babble about it to-day, as if it were still intact and vigorous!

The first fourteen clauses of the Treaty regulated the future of Poland. Where are they now? The kingdom of Poland, with its Polish constitution, its Polish army and its “real independence” (to use the Emperor Alexander’s phrase), where is it to be found? The Treaty Kingdom is gone, but Poland is still living. The national life, the undying spirit of the Poles—that spirit which oppression appears to stimulate and strengthen—has nothing in common with the defunct protocols of 1815. “The Polish provisions of the Treaty of Vienna,” said Lord Palmerston, “were violated by Russia almost as soon as they were written.” Austria violated the Treaty of Vienna by absorbing the free towns of Cracow. Prussia never carried out the stipulations respecting Posen. The Kingdom of the Low Countries is only a fiction of the Treaty. Every provision in the Treaty relating to Italy has been set aside. The Denmark of the Treaty is not the Denmark of our day. Germany of the Treaty no longer exists. Hanover had been annexed to Prussia in 1805. This stipulation of the Peace of Presburgh was set

aside in 1815, and Hanover was restored to King George. Without a whisper of opposition in England, we now behold Hanover taken from the grandson of King George III. and re-annexed to Prussia. The Diet is gone. The Free Towns are no longer free. England has resigned her charge in the Adriatic. The Treaty frontiers of Prussia have advanced. The Treaty frontiers of Austria have receded. The slopes of Savoy no longer threaten France. The existence of an independent Belgium was declared by the Treaty to be impossible. The House of Bourbon was always to rule in France, and the dreaded dynasty of Bonaparte was to be destroyed for ever.

Thus the Treaty was broken by those who made it. But, strange to say, the last European Power to violate the engagements of 1815 was the Power against whom the engagements were made—namely, France. More than this, as long as the Treaty had any cohesion and any semblance of a sanction, as long as it had the character of a law, France was distinguished by her efforts to enforce it. When Russia set aside the guarantees respecting Poland, France called upon England, and offered, if England would act with her, to vindicate the law. But England refused. Prince Talleyrand pointed out to Lord Palmerston that England had signed the Treaty of Vienna, and thus entered into solemn engagements, which would be broken if Russia were permitted to set the Treaty at defiance. Lord Palmerston acknowledged that Russia was violating the Treaty, but he declined to act upon the engagements made by Lord Castlereagh and the Duke of Wellington. Again, when Cracow was taken by Austria;

England refused to recognise the value of her own signature. In fact, England by her complicity with the law-breakers, showed her estimate of the Treaty. France, for her own sake, had very little reason to regret this.

After Waterloo the four victorious allies sacked the rest of Europe, and especially the Empire of France. From that empire they took territory having a population of thirty-two millions. They exhausted diplomatic art in crushing France, and giving her a weak and treacherous frontier. Savoy on the one side, and the Rhenish Provinces on the other, were taken from her. To deprive her of Savoy laid her open to invasion on the South. To give the Rhenish province to Prussia would not only destroy a natural frontier but establish a chronic feud between the neighbours. This was an old idea of Mr. Pitt's, and it was rigidly carried out by Lord Castlereagh.

England, Austria, and Prussia, but especially the two former, were resolute in compressing France, and surrounding her with inimical interests. The Duke of Wellington, and Prince Metternich, pointed out to their respective governments the secure guarantee they had obtained of future feebleness in France. They had accomplished their ends by placing her under the slopes of Savoy on the South, and opening the valleys of Lorraine and the plains of Champagne, to the easy entrance of an enemy upon the east. Of course it was to be France of the Bourbons; but the enthusiasm of the hundred days had increased the apprehensions of the Holy Alliance. They had an instinctive dread of the Nation, and, in spite of the solemn asseverations of their protocols, a grave

doubt of the Dynasty. If they could only have sent the French people to a second St. Helena, their minds would be tranquil. As this was not easy to accomplish, the next best thing was to isolate, to diminish, and to enfeeble the territory where the French people were permitted to dwell.

In 1815, England and Austria were commanding powers in Europe. Where is their influence in Europe now? If it is curious to mark the contrast between the all-powerful Foreign Office of Lord Castlereagh, and the utterly imbecile Foreign Office of Lord Russell, between the Austria of Metternich, and the sad negation of 1866, it is equally curious and far more practical to recall the respective attitudes of Prussia and of France in the negotiations of 1815, and to compare them with their relative positions to-day.

Prussia and France, the two powers most concerned about the Rhine frontiers, were in accord upon that question. They differed upon many other points in the treaty; but they agreed upon this. France did not wish to lose her frontier, and Prussia did not desire to take it.

In one of the documents laid before the Congress by Count Hardenberg, he states that Prussia desired to yield the whole of the provinces given to her on the left bank of the Rhine. Prussia, he said, attached little importance to possessions which brought her into such close contact with France; and, he added, Prussia had accepted the left bank of the Rhine only in conformity to the wishes of Great Britain: in occupying that uncomfortable and

unsought-for position, she was really sacrificing herself for the public good. Count Hardenberg pointed out that Prussia had a different destiny. She desired reconstruction on a better geographical scheme. The proposals of 1815 would leave Prussia with a defective configuration. With a prophetic glance into the future, he sees that this defective configuration will always be a source of irritation which a Prussian sovereign would endeavour to remedy "should it ever, unfortunately happen that war broke out between Austria and Prussia."

But the arguments of Prussia did not prevail. The Rhine frontier was forced upon her.

France, of course, opposed the arrangement also. The Nation and the Dynasty were both indignant. M. de Laforest, one of the negotiators for Louis XVIII., said, "Wormwood is poured forth for France drop by drop." Talleyrand lost all patience, but his anger was worse than useless. His successor at the Congress, the Duc de Richelieu, thus records the final calamity :—

"All is ended. More dead than alive, I have put my name to this fatal treaty. I had sworn not to do it. I said so to the King; but this unhappy Prince with tears implored me not to abandon him. I could therefore no longer hesitate, for, expiring under the misfortunes which overwhelm her, France demanded a prompt deliverance."

Prussia and France had thus to submit to the dictatorial intervention in their affairs, of Austria and England. Fifty years have gone, and left great changes. The almost paramount foreign influence that England once

wielded is now possessed by France. The external power of Austria, from Bohemia to the Baltic, has passed from Vienna to Berlin. Nor is it with Prussia merely an aggrandisement of moral influence. She has extended and consolidated her territory, doubled her population, reconstructed the geographical scheme of 1815, and verified the remarkable prediction of Count Hardenberg. More than this. In dealing with Denmark, Count Bismarck has justified his policy by an appeal to the two pregnant principles, the principle of Nationalities, and the principle of Natural boundaries.

It is in the face of these facts that Napoleon the Third has reopened the question of the frontier of the Rhine.

In the vicissitudes of that famous frontier there is much to interest the student of history; but to discover that which will throw most light on the negotiations of the hour we need not revert to remote episodes. At this moment, as far as it is useful to recall the past, the traditional sentiment of the French nation and the policy of modern Europe with respect to this boundary, are points worth remembering.

It is not fair to represent the securing of the frontier of the Rhine as a passion of France. From the first the national sentiment on the subject has been based on that which is infinitely more powerful and permanent than popular passion. With the masses it is doubtless a patriotic instinct, but with all thoughtful Frenchmen it is the result of rational reflection.

There are as many political parties in France as there are religious in England; and they attack each other with

equal charity. The Legitimists will ostracise an Orleanist for adhering to a fallen dynasty with the same unsparing zeal that the Archbishop of Canterbury pronounces in favour of the excommunication of Bishop Colenso for using his logical mind in the sceptical process of private judgment. But he would be a very inaccurate observer of English religious life, or a very unjust critic, who did not admit that there are questions which unite the bitterest dissenters with the most exclusive churchmen, such as the attempt now being made to remedy the flagrant neglect of workhouse hospitals, and to relieve other painful calamities of the poor.

And so it is in France with the various groups of political foes: there are some few questions on which they are, to a man, united; and this question of the Rhine frontier is one. The vast body of Imperialists of every rank, the Republicans of every shade, the Legitimists and Orleanists in their own little coteries, all use on this subject the same language and cherish the same resolve.

This unanimous sentiment of the French nation has been unshaken, and the same from the very beginning. It penetrated the heart of France the moment the frontiers were touched. When Louis XVIII. was restored, M. Thiers tells us, "The perusal of the Treaty produced a most saddening effect, not alone upon the men compromised by the last revolution, but upon the most impartial and disinterested classes of the nation. To their eyes the cruel hand of the stranger was visible in these transactions, especially in the tracing of our frontiers." And in de-

scribing the loss of the frontier fortresses he says, "The public even, the rational disinterested public, could not help feeling a profound sadness in seeing so many important fortresses abandoned, and though they did not cry out treason, as did the military men, yet they felt that they were under the iron hand of foreigners." The temporary dynasty felt this humiliation also. "These sentiments," says M. Thiers, "had entered even into the Royal Council itself. The Duke de Berry with his accustomed impetuosity exclaimed—forgetting that he was blaming his own father—that it was the consequence of the fault committed in so hastily signing the unfortunate armistice. The king looked maliciously at his brother and nephew, and seemed to approve what had been said by the latter. The Duke d'Artois contented himself with exhibiting a profound grief, the grief of a good man, who receives, without returning an injury, and it became an established opinion that the cause of France had been sacrificed."

As the historian of half a century ago is the politician of to-day and the brilliant leader of the Opposition in the French Chambers, his own judgment is worth recording now:—

"We were obliged to submit," says M. Thiers, "for there was no means of resisting the unbridled ambitions all leagued against us. Only one reflection suggests itself in contemplating such deeds, a reflection of which our oppressors took little heed, and it is that by acting thus they rendered Napoleon much less guilty in the eyes of the world, and the Bourbons less popular in those of France."

Such was the feeling of mutilated France. The dis-severed territories were not contented either. "The Belgian provinces," says M. Thiers, "were freed from the conscription for the moment, but not from indirect imposts. They were debarred from intercourse with France, whose commerce had contributed so much to enrich them. They accused Austria, that had principally contributed to their separation from France, of having betrayed and sold them to England. The Rhenish provinces were no better satisfied. If, like the Belgians, they were no longer subjected to conscription, and the Rhine, the chief source of their wealth, was allowed free communication with the sea, the French markets were no longer open for the products of their industry, which had greatly increased under the Empire; nor was the commerce of Prussia a compensation for that of France. They also experienced the inconveniences of foreign occupation, for the Prussian army was in their territory, and they were horribly ill-treated by Blucher's soldiers, who had not yet learned to consider the inhabitants of Cologne and Aix-la-Chapelle as fellow countrymen."

Unlike the changeless and unanimous policy of France, the policy of modern Europe with respect to this frontier has been vacillating and contradictory.

Europe witnessed the treaty of Campo-Formio, which left France the Rhine provinces. Europe signed the peace of Luneville, which reassured to her the Rhine provinces and much more. Then she had been victorious,—but even when France was defeated, Europe still left her the frontier of the Rhine.

When the disastrous campaign of 1813 threw France open to the allies, they paused upon the banks of the Rhine, which, since 1795, had never been crossed by an enemy. Prince Metternich, Count Nesselrode, and Lord Aberdeen drew up the brief statement which announced the views of the sovereigns as to the future boundaries of France :—

“The allied sovereigns will not separate, but will remain united, whatever may happen, until peace is concluded. This peace must be general, and prevail on the sea as well as on land. It must be founded on the principle of the independence of every nation within its limits, either natural or historical. The Rhine, the Alps, and the Pyrenees will mark the frontiers of France, but she must confine herself within these limits.”

From Frankfort the allies also issued a declaration in which they asserted that, while determined to put an end to the preponderance which the Emperor Napoleon had long exercised beyond the limits of France, they desired that that country should remain powerful and happy, and that its territory should preserve an extent unknown under its ancient Kings, “because,” they said, “the French power, great and strong, is in Europe one of the fundamental bases of the social edifice; because a great people can only be tranquil so long as they are happy; because a brave nation is not to be regarded as overthrown because in its turn it has experienced reverses, after an obstinate and bloody struggle, in which it has combated with its accustomed valour.”

Within four weeks the concise note of the allied sove-

reigns had found its way to Paris, and had been answered. Napoleon agreed, purely and simply, to the proposal. Nevertheless, the allies, on the 21st of December, crossed the Rhine. The Commander-in-Chief, Prince Schwarzenberg, before doing so, issued a proclamation beginning with this sentence :—

“ Frenchmen !

“ Victory has led the allied armies to your frontiers ; they wish to cross ;” and concluding with these words, “ We had hoped to find peace before touching French soil ; we are now going to seek it there.”

Thus in the joint note of the sovereigns, and in the subsequent proclamation of their military chief, the Rhine was deliberately recognized as the frontier of France.

A few months after this, when Napoleon had to exchange the Empire for Elba, and when Louis XVIII. was restored, the allies broke faith with France, and insisted, as a final settlement, upon a different frontier. But this new frontier, it must be admitted, was far better than that of 1790. In 1790 it swept between Maubeuge and Givet. The line traced in 1814 from Maubeuge to Givet being made slightly convex, effaced the sweep, and gave France two additional fortresses, Phillippeville and Marienbourg. Leaving Luxembourg without the line, it was continued to Sarre in such a manner as to leave Sarrelouis in France. Following the northern bank of the Queich, the frontier also included the important district around Landau. On the south France was to retain the slopes of Savoy.

We have seen how all this "final settlement" was altered. In 1814 France had been deprived of natural limits: in 1815 France was deprived of national defences. Her eastern plains were deliberately laid open for the ready advance of a hostile force. Her valleys in the south were laid bare with the same sinister purpose. It was done with malice prepense, and was to involve moral degradation as well as geographical weakness. Lord Castlereagh, according to M. Thiers, thought the allies had acted very handsomely in not treating France as Poland had been treated. She was to be no longer, save in name, a great power. But how little did the eminent men who plotted and protocolled, appreciate the fertile genius and endless resources of the gallant nation they were endeavouring to crush?

One would imagine that the eagle which "flew from steeple to steeple, even to the towers of Notre Dame," and the frantic joy of the French nation in restoring the Empire, would have taught to the assembled sovereigns a lesson of non-intervention. But no, it only filled them with alarm and rage. There was a collapse during the hundred days, and then came the strong stimulant of Waterloo. The terror of the allies was succeeded by an intoxication of triumph. Indeed, the altered tone of the Castlereagh correspondence, and of other State papers at that exciting moment, suggest the idea that the writers had partaken of a drug well known in the east of Europe, and which to this day finds favour with M. Dumas. Where are their labours now? Gone, all gone; and as to their records, even the more sober protocols of Vienna will in

future be perused by young attachés as the Arabian Nights of diplomacy.

It may not be uninteresting to mention the latest views upon the Rhenish frontier of that experienced statesman who signed the warrant for consigning Napoleon the First to St. Helena, and who, nearly half a century after, assisted with all his influence in restoring the French Empire under Napoleon the Third. For the perfect accuracy of the following conversation, the author can vouch.

It was the habit of Lord Palmerston to converse often unreservedly in the tea-room of the House of Commons, with political opponents—great leaders as well as humble privates—whom he was not likely to meet at Cambridge House. Speaking in the summer of 1863, to one of the rank and file of the Opposition, he said, “I hear from Paris, that the Emperor has been talking to you again about Poland. Do you know what he really wants?”

“I suppose,” was the reply, “he wants you to keep the engagements which England shares in common with France, and which Lord Russell has, in his despatches, again and again——”

“Don’t quote Lord John’s despatches,” interrupted the Premier, “let us talk sensibly; don’t you know the Emperor only wants the Rhine? Has he not been speaking about it?”

“I really know nothing of the kind,” said the other. “The Emperor is a man of business. He speaks always of the matter in hand, and he is not very likely to waste

his time talking to me on an abstract question of remote politics."

"Ah!" replied Lord Palmerston, "your favourite Poland is far more abstract and remote even at this hour than the Rhenish frontier."

"But supposing so," rejoined the other, "is it possible to see any such benefit to England in keeping the Rhenish frontier from France as would make you oppose its restoration?"

"Certainly not," said the great minister, "certainly not; but there is a vast difference between opposing and encouraging. It would be insanity for us to oppose that which the French have such a natural desire to accomplish, and in which we have not the smallest direct interest one way or the other; but there are good reasons also why we must not do anything now to encourage them." He returned to his seat in the House without saying what those reasons were.

Whether England is bound to assist in repairing the flagrant errors to which she contributed so largely in 1815, whether it would not be wise for her to give her moral support to France in the achievement of what Lord Palmerston called a natural desire,—are questions which may soon require to be decided. It is clear that a policy friendly to France would not be unpopular here. Such a policy would also be eminently conservative, and would be consistent with the character of Lord Stanley, for it would be alike honourable and safe.

Whether the public opinion of England will heartily respond to the public opinion of France is now a matter

of speculation. But this much is certain, that the interchange of ideas between M. Beneditti and Count Bismarck has opened a grave question, a question which will be closed only when the legitimate wishes of France have been fulfilled; and, until that rational settlement is accomplished, it is evident there can be no real stability in the complex system of European states.

THE END.



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